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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted of the member institutions of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) to determine the status of outcomes assessment on their campuses, as well as the usefulness of the NASULGC "Statement of Principles on Outcomes Assessment." Seventy-three institutions (response rate = 49 percent) responded to a study questionnaire. Responses revealed that while many institutions purported to be involved in undergraduate student outcome assessment, most had only recently begun efforts in this area. In addition, the responding universities supported the NASULGC "Statement of Principles," but a few expressed concern that the second principle of employing incentives rather than regulations or penalties was the one most violated by external groups. The "Statement of Principles" was viewed as a helpful set of standards and several institutions claimed to use it for their internal planning. Problems associated with assessments were the following: costs; funding pressures; the misuse of the data generated; and faculty skepticism, fears, and resistance. Observations regarding the results of this survey and general trends in the outcomes assessment movement are offered. The Statement of Principles is appended. Contains four references. (GLR)

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The Status of Student Outcomes Assessment at NASULGC Member Institutions

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The Status of Student Outcomes Assessment at NASULGC Member Institutions

Abstract

A survey was conducted of the member institutions of the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) to determine the status of outcomes assessment on their campuses, as well as the usefulness of the NASULGC "Statement of Principles on Outcomes Assessment." In general it was found that, while many purport to be involved in undergraduate student outcomes assessment, most have only recently begun efforts in this area and cannot, as yet, point to changes that have occurred as a result. A number of observations are offered regarding the results of this particular survey and general trends in the outcomes assessment movement.

Introduction and Perspectives

The movement for student outcomes assessment continues to attract attention on college and university campuses. Accrediting agencies, state legislators, state agencies associated with post secondary education, and colleges and universities have reviewed, requested, or initiated programs on student outcomes assessment.

In November, 1988 the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) officially adopted the "Statement of Principles on Student Outcomes Assessment." The "Statement of Principles" was intended to provide some reasonable guidelines to institutions, accrediting agencies, and governmental bodies that are involved in trying to assess undergraduate student learning. While addressed to its own membership, which is composed of primarily large, publicly-supported universities, the principles developed can be useful to other segments of higher education. The "Statement of Principles" includes the following:

for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Thirty-First Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at The Westin St. Francis, San Francisco, California, May 26-29, 1991. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications Editorial
Advisory Committee

1. Institutional, program, and student outcomes assessment should focus, primarily, on the effectiveness of academic programs and on the improvement of student learning and performance.
2. States and institutions should rely primarily on incentives rather than regulations or penalties to effect student outcomes assessment and foster improvement.
3. Institutional programs for evaluation and assessment should be developed in collaboration with faculty.
4. Assessment requirements should permit colleges and universities to develop institutional programs and define indicators of quality appropriate to their missions and goals and consistent with state-wide objectives and standards.
5. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to use multiple methods of assessment for improving teaching and learning and demonstrating achievement.
6. Requirements for assessment should be fiscally conservative and avoid imposing costly evaluation programs on institutions or state agencies.
7. Within an institution, assessment programs should be linked to strategic planning or program review, or to some comprehensive strategy intended to encourage change and improvement.

Purpose

The purpose of the paper is to describe the results of the survey and to summarize some of the patterns and idiosyncrasies that emerge from viewing the survey results. A secondary purpose is to alert AIR members to the existence of the "Statement of Principles" and to stimulate discussion as to the actual status of assessment on campuses as opposed to the official pronouncements on the subject.

Literature Review

The literature in this area is growing quickly. One of the best sources providing an overview of assessment issues and practices is the volume edited by Ewell (1985). A recent update on the official status of outcomes assessment at a variety of institutions is given by El-Khawas (1990). One of the striking features in the latter report is the lip service given to outcomes assessment by university administrators. Over 80% of the responding institutions report some kind of assessment activity as being underway, with

over half of the public institutions working under a state mandate. As El-Khawas points out, however,

> The responses do not necessarily reflect a substantial level of activity. Evidence from another survey of assessment activity indicates, for example, that relatively comprehensive approaches to assessment - involving many parts of the institution and a long-term commitment to assessment methods - are found at about 30 percent of the institutions (Johnson, 1990).
>
> The overall picture, then, is best seen as one in which about one-third of American colleges and universities have serious initiatives directed towards student assessment, and most others are experimenting with student assessment on their campuses, possibly only in discussions among a few persons or within a single department. (p. 13)

The results of the NASULGC survey support the findings of El-Khawas and Johnson. They also reveal some possible explanations as to why this has been the case thus far.

Data Sources and Methodology

During the spring of 1990 NASULGC, seeking to determine more systematically the effect that the "Statement of Principles" may have had on the member institutions, conducted a survey on assessment of its members through its Sub-Committee on Assessment for the Academic Council on Academic Affairs. The specific questions included in the survey were as follows:

1. What is the status of Student Outcomes Assessment on your campus?
2. What are the goals of student outcomes assessment?
3. How effective and helpful to the University is your assessment program?
4. Are the principles or underlying assumptions consistent with the NASULGC statement?
5. In what ways has the NASULGC "Statement" been directly useful to you or to the campus?
6. What are the critical problems or issues posed, in your judgement, by student outcomes assessment?

A response rate of 49 percent indicated the continuing interest in the topic. A copy of the "Statement of Principles" appears in the Appendix.

Institutional representatives responding to the survey ranged from chief academic officers of individual campuses to academic vice presidents of university systems. A number of respondents did not complete the questionnaire itself, but instead submitted letters of response or included internal studies undertaken in their institutions. The internal studies proved most difficult to analyze, for they were often lengthy and did not address specifically the items in the NASULGC questionnaire. Despite these challenges, an attempt was made to categorize and summarize the responses from each institution.

Status of Student Outcomes Assessment

The first question on the survey asked: "What is the status of Student Outcomes Assessment on your campus? (Have you instituted a program? How extensive is it; what resources have been invested, etc?)." The responses provided two kinds of information: whether or not the campus had a student assessment program in place, as well as its stage of development; and whether or not it was state mandated, with or without additional state funds set aside for this purpose.

Of the 73 responding institutions, 6 reported no program in place and none under discussion or planned. Most observed that assessment plans were in embryonic stages, or that discussions were underway to develop such programs (see Table 1). Efforts in student outcomes assessment appear widespread but in their early stages at most institutions in NASULGC.

Table 1

Program Status

No program in place/no plans to start one	6
No program in place/planning discussions in progress	22
Preparing to implement a program in near future	6
In the early stages of a program	28
A program has been in place for two or more years	11
	73

Less than half the respondents reported state mandates that required assessment programs; however, it was not always possible to determine from the responses whether or not a state mandate actually existed. In addition, several commentators suggested it seemed wise to adopt assessment activities in order to preempt state-mandated requirements. Table 2 summarizes the responses regarding state-mandated programs.

Table 2

State Mandates

Issues of state mandate not noted	38
No state mandate involved	7
State mandate/funds identified	8
State mandate/no funds identified	13
State mandate/funding unknown	7
	73

An interesting issue arose in responses to this question. Several institutions, particularly with campuses where general education testing is well established, considered student-outcomes assessment and general-education testing to be synonymous. Representatives of such universities reported no other types of assessment activities and seemed satisfied with their achievements in this area. Ironically, some of those who were among the first involved in general education testing now are the least likely to have comprehensive student-assessment programs.

Goals of Student Outcomes Assessment

Item two on the questionnaire queried: "What are the goals of student outcomes assessment?" Most respondents reported a concern for program improvement and improved student learning, along with determining how well individual units were achieving their goals for student achievement (for example, measuring program effectiveness). Some also mentioned accountability or accreditation as a goal, while others focused on minimum competency standards for each student. A summary of institutional goals is shown in Table 3. (The number of goals exceeds 73 due to multiple responses for some institutions.)

Table 3

Goals

None reported/unable to determine	20
Effectiveness -- units achieve their goals	3
Program improvement/student performance improvement	23
Both effectiveness and improvement	23
Minimum competency for each student	6
Accountability/accreditation	13

Some of the goals, such as effectiveness and accountability, appear closely related. This set of goals, therefore, could be collapsed into fewer categories.

Effectiveness of Assessment Internally

The third item on the questionnaire asked: "How effective and helpful to the University is your assessment program?" As can be seen in Table 4, most respondents believed it still too early to tell. Some institutions, however, reported that assessment activities have highlighted areas for changes (especially in the curriculum) and that these changes are being implemented. The responses to this question are consistent with the fact that

most programs are in the beginning stages, so that institutions have not yet had an opportunity to make changes based on their findings.

Table 4

Effectiveness

No answer/unable to determine	26
Not helpful thus far	5
Too early to tell/unable to judge yet	20
Some changes	13
Moderate changes	5
Major impact on programs	4
	73

Needless to say, a fine line existed between those who reported some changes versus moderate changes. The important point, however, is that 22 institutions (30 percent) reported some changes in programs due to assessment activities.

Consistency With NASULGC Principles

The fourth question was: "Are the principles or underlying assumptions consistent with the NASULGC statement?" No respondent reported a problem or complaint with the NASULGC "Statement of Principles." Most respondents answered positively on this question or observed that their own procedures and principles were developing along the lines of the NASULGC "Statement of Principles."

Concern was expressed regarding Principle 2, which states: "States and institutions should rely primarily on incentives rather than regulations or penalties to effect student outcomes assessment and foster improvement." As can be seen in Table 5, several representatives who replied did not consider the approach taken in their respective states to be consistent with that principle.

Table 5

Consistency with NASULGC Principles

No answer/unable to determine	22
Yes, as far as we can tell	42
Yes, except for Principle 2	6
We are moving in same direction, not there yet	3
	73

Usefulness of "Statement of Principles"

The next question asked: "In what ways has the NASULGC statement been directly useful to you or to the campus?" The Statement appeared to be helpful in planning or in confirming and supporting what had previously been planned or initiated. A few individuals also reported being unaware of the Statement. A few found it helpful in educating state-level officials intent on developing programs that contradicted one or more of the principles in the Statement.

Table 6

Usefulness of "Statement"

No answer/unable to determine	20
Not used/did not know about it	13
Helpful in planning/developing guidelines	19
Helpful in confirming/supporting prior plans	16
Helpful in educating state-level officials	4
Combination of confirming/supporting and educating officials	1
	73

Critical Problems or Issues

The final question is as follows: "What are the critical problems or issues posed, in your judgment, by student outcomes assessment?" Most respondents listed more than one issue or problem, with the costs associated with such effort the most frequently mentioned. Possible misuse of data (for example, comparisons across institutions) repres-

ented another major concern. Faculty resistance and skepticism achieved a high place on the list, along with the need to involve faculty in the development and implementation of the programs involved. The problems of measuring quality and other measurement issues also received mention. Table 7 provides a summary of the problems or issues mentioned by the respondents. (The number of issues exceeds 73, since respondents could indicate more than one issue.)

Table 7

Critical Problems or Issues

Cost of assessment/increased funding pressures	19
Possible misuse of the data	15
Faculty skepticism, fears, resistance	12
Need to involve faculty in development and implementation	11
Measurement issues/validity of results of assessment	11
Measurement of quality/use of results internally	11
Substantial time commitment of faculty involved	9
Potential for valuing quantitative results over qualitative	6
Matching external requirements with internal needs	5
Need to obtain student cooperation for testing	4
Teaching to the test by faculty	3
Measuring time impact of general education when varied courses comprise it	3
Oversimplification at state level/unreasonable expectations	3
Measuring achievement of transfer students	2
Describing assessment mechanisms to the public	2
Decentralization leads to varying quality of reports	1
Difficult to assess remedial programs	1
Methods used are too limited/not comprehensive enough	1
Clarification of common goals	1

Results and Conclusions

The findings from the survey suggest that a substantial portion of the universities in NASULGC are involved in student outcomes assessment efforts in some way, often encouraged by actual or by threatened state mandates. While most universities remain in the discussion or early implementation stages, quite a few (30 percent) report changes occurring as a result of student outcomes assessment. The NASULGC "Statement of Principles" proved helpful for planning purposes or for confirming plans that had been

developed previously. Potential areas of concern include fear of misuse of the data generated by outcomes assessment and the possibility of "overselling" what assessment can achieve. At the institutional level, the financial costs associated with assessment emerge as a major concern, as well as the cost of the time spent by faculty and others in assessment activities. Involving the faculty in the process is seen as critical to overcoming initial skepticism, resistance, and fear. The general tone of the responses is positive in regard to the contribution of NASULGC to the national debate on the issue of assessment.

The responses to the survey suggest that most institutions have finally decided that accrediting bodies and/or governmental ones are not going to give up on their attempts to have undergraduate student outcomes assessment take place at the institutional level. They now agree that such activities will have to take place, or at least the appearance of outcomes assessment will have to be necessary. Most, however, say that they are in the very early stages and don't have much to report yet in the way of results impacting their own students. Improved student performance and program effectiveness are the most frequently reported goals, though accountability and accreditation are also major reasons given for undertaking assessment.

The responding universities supported the NASULGC "Statement of Principles," with a few expressing concern that the second principle of employing incentives rather than regulations or penalties was the one most violated by external groups. Many found the "Statement" helpful for internal planning and use, and a few reported using it in negotiations with external groups. In this regard the "Statement of Principles" was seen as a helpful set of standards, as opposed to the desired approach of a single college or university.

A number of critical problems or issues were mentioned. The cost associated with assessment and related funding pressures was the most frequently cited concern, followed

by possible misuse of data generated and faculty skepticism, fears, and resistance. To those familiar with the outcomes movement, these concerns should not come as a surprise.

Discussion - NASULGC Survey

Reviewing the responses from the NASULGC institutions was an interesting experience in regards to those who did not respond at all and those who responded in a quite negative way. Without naming names, it appeared that the most prestigious universities were the least likely to respond and, when they did respond, were the least likely to be positive regarding outcomes assessment efforts. A common thread was something like the following: "We are well known to be a great university; there is much evidence in the prestige ratings of various kinds. We know that we are doing a great job based on what our colleagues and the employers of our graduates report to us. We do not need some outside body, governmental or otherwise, to tell us how to measure what we do." Underlying such responses are the valuing of research higher than undergraduate teaching. A few were under state mandates to assess undergraduate learning and reported that fact, but several of the most prestigious institutions reported no such requirement and no interest in undertaking a formal assessment process without one.

A sidelight to such responses is that several came from states where mandatory testing is required. It appears that mandatory testing is seen in many cases as meeting all the requirements of assessing outcomes, so that the faculty at the department level remain virtually untouched by the national assessment movement. Ironically, mandatory testing in these situations creates less interest at the university level in improving undergraduate instruction rather than more. This is especially true of the most selective institutions whose students are likely to pass entry level and rising junior examinations

in large numbers anyway, since testing in these situations has little impact upon the students and, consequently, the faculty.

An underlying theme in a number of the survey responses seems to be that many of the respondents do not see great benefits to their institutions in the assessment movement. Looking at the recent history of the interest in outcomes assessment, it is obvious that some of the best known programs are at small colleges and less selective universities seeking ways to validate the results of their instructional activities (see Ewell, 1985 as an example). It is those who felt that they were doing an excellent job with the kinds of students entering their institutions, but who were not getting proper recognition due to the research-oriented status system of American postsecondary education, who have led the outcomes assessment movement in the U.S. It is the "Rodney Dangerfields" seeking respect, not those who already had that respect through research and graduate instruction, who have embraced outcomes assessment as a means to show their own excellence. Small wonder, then, that major research universities have been slow to jump on the bandwagon, particularly since the benefits of doing so have not always been obvious.

Over 20 years ago Jencks and Riesman (1968), in their landmark book, *The Academic Revolution*, described in great detail the problem of a single, selective, research-oriented model for U.S. postsecondary education. They decried the lack of other models and predicted the demise of those colleges and universities that did not or could not follow the Harvard/Berkeley model of success. In retrospect it appears that the outcomes assessment movement has finally added another respected model, one based on showing student intellectual, social, and ethical growth. It is now more acceptable in academe, and is highly regarded among the general public, to be a non-selective institution which produces substantial growth among undergraduate students of differing backgrounds. The excellent undergraduate institution, measured in student learning as opposed to in-

coming selectivity, provides a much needed alternative to the model described by Jencks and Riesman. Those who have adopted and have been successful with the more traditional model rightly question what benefit the assessment movement can have for them.

(Inherent in this difference of perspective between more selective and less selective institutions is their respective preferences for ways to measure learning. Selective institutions have traditionally focused on achievement: take in the best students and graduate the best alumni. The less selective colleges and universities often prefer a "value added" approach which emphasizes the amount of growth from entry level to exit. The difficulty in this tact for selective institutions is that it is easier to show substantial or even dramatic growth from a low beginning point than from a high one. There is a ceiling effect in other words. A good deal of early work in student outcomes assessment has emphasized value added learning as an alternative to the achievement method that has served selective institutions so well in the past. For a discussion of these issues, see Jacobi, Astin, and Ayala, 1987.)

The most obvious benefit of the assessment movement for major research universities is that undergraduate education can be improved and a sense of excitement can develop in an area of traditionally lower priority. Such improvement can lead to increased political support for the institution, since most lawmakers are concerned primarily with undergraduate education. This is a major reason why assessment has been so popular with state and federal level politicians. The danger of unfavorable comparisons to other institutions in this area can overwhelm such potential, however. Besides, there have been few tangible rewards, economic or otherwise, to emphasizing assessment of undergraduate learning at major research universities. The question becomes, then, what is the proper role of assessment in such institutions.

Major research universities should recognize that assessment is here to stay in one form or another, through the accreditation process if nowhere else, and seek out those areas

sessment meetings, as well as the AAHE Assessment Forum, suggest that many of those charged with responsibility for outcomes assessment on our campuses have backgrounds in the humanities and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences. The result of this trend is a generally healthy skepticism about the use of standardized tests in assessing outcomes, as well as a concern about the quality of oral and written communication levels among college students. A potential drawback to this trend is that a number of people working in assessment have little or no background in survey design, statistical analysis, computer programming, or other technical skill areas that are necessary to support sound assessment practices. In addition, there is variation in the amount of knowledge of higher education generally, since many of these people were trained in a single academic discipline and have limited experience beyond a few institutions. The assessors will need to guard against poor technical decisions based on lack of training and experience, as well as "reinventing the wheel" due to lack of knowledge of what has gone on elsewhere previously. In order to mature as a discipline, assessment will require research beyond the descriptive studies that seem to dominate the literature at this point, and that may require skills that are not commonly found among today's assessors.

Discussion - Next Steps

Just as some major research universities are beginning to put more than a token amount of effort into outcomes assessment, many other institutions are at much later stages of mature programs. There is a danger among the more established programs in addressing next steps; the challenge is to keep the process fresh and those participating learning new things. As an example, once an institution has completed the first round of a five year program and begins a second cycle, there is little benefit in repeating the same kinds of activities that occurred in the first round. There is a real danger of running out of steam, of assessment fatigue. While it may be necessary to continue some kinds of activities on a periodic basis, such as surveys of freshmen, seniors, alumni, employers, etc., these

where they have natural interests and unique advantages. Improving undergraduate learning in large classes is one such opportunity. Economic realities will continue to require large classes, especially during the first year or two of undergraduate study. Improving student learning in these large classes is a very challenging problem, but one which major research universities are uniquely suited to address. Related to large classes is the training of future faculty, who often begin as graduate assistants supplementing regular faculty in large classes. No other sector is capable of educating future faculty in assessing student learning, since most receive their graduate degrees from major research universities. Nor do other types of institutions have the number and variety of skilled researchers to address data analysis, questionnaire design, subject area content, and the range of scholarly issues inherent in truly comprehensive assessments. In addition, such institutions frequently offer instruction in academic disciplines that are not common elsewhere. The improvement of assessment in such fields as nuclear engineering, for example, will have to be left with the few major research universities where such subjects are taught.

In summary, there are a few risks to NASULGC institutions and other large, research-oriented universities to involving themselves in outcomes assessment. Given the high level of interest and expectations among the general public, however, the risks appear to be rising for NOT making headway in this area. There are also a number of opportunities awaiting those institutions which look to their traditional strengths in addressing the issues and problems which arise.

Discussion - The Assessors

A trend which should be monitored by those in institutional research and other quantitative areas of postsecondary education administration has to do with who is driving the assessment movement nationally and locally. The programs of state and regional as-

need not be on an annual basis and need not focus on the same topics each time. Careful planning is required to ensure that critical surveys, studies, etc. are done on a regular basis, while also allowing for flexibility in addressing new issues and insuring that the same information is not being reported each time.

A related issue is how to measure the success of an assessment program. Some seem to believe that a program is successful when a wide audience outside the institution knows about it and respects it. That can be a true measure only when the faculty and administrators within the institution are equally enthusiastic and support the program. This will take place only when they see benefits to themselves and the institution in an assessment program, i.e., when it becomes integrated into the everyday fabric of the place. Those programs deemed to be ancillary enterprises, on the edge of academic life, cannot be expected to last beyond the current state mandate or accreditation visit or the next round of budget cuts. Only when outcomes assessment is perceived internally as being a central part of academic life can it be expected to survive and prosper. Those working in the field need to constantly ask themselves whether their activities are moving these programs toward integration and survival or segregation and demise.

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Statement of Principles On Student Outcomes Assessment

An influential student outcomes assessment movement has been building across the country for several years. It has developed partly because of the strong criticism of higher education expressed repeatedly during the 1980's. It has been stimulated, as well, by the firm belief held by many public and some education officials that colleges and universities should be held accountable and should also develop reliable means to improve the quality of education.

In a number of states, legislatures, governors, or higher-education boards have required, or strongly encouraged, state-wide student outcomes assessment. The purposes, expectations, and means have differed from state to state. Some mandates have stressed accountability; while others have emphasized program improvement or individual student learning. The plans and programs subsequently instituted have also varied a great deal. There is, in fact, a remarkable variety and complexity of assessment programs across the country.

Recently, accrediting organizations have begun to request outcomes data as part of their review. The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) is specifically beginning to, and American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has prepared its own standardized test, although the exact use of it has not yet been determined. At the last meeting of Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA), outcomes assessment was given serious discussion.

During the period of this growing movement some institutions and a few states have developed effective assessment programs in the new mode; others are beginning. Many in higher education, however, remain apprehensive about the effects of state-wide mandates on the integrity of colleges and universities, on academic programs, on faculty and students, and on appropriations and budgets. Many also recognize that there is a great deal yet to learn about assessment before it will serve the states and higher education well; they are, as a result, uncertain about how to design and implement effective and efficient programs.

At the same time, many leaders in higher education recognize the obligation of colleges and universities to offer the best education possible and to be accountable to the public in reasonable and realistic ways. They are beginning to understand the benefits of assessment. It can, for example, provide the basis for informed decisions about program development; it can also stimulate program improvement and thereby serve both students and faculty; it can, further, provide the basis for communicating the genuine achievements of a college or university to its various publics.

Most of the initiatives for outcomes assessment have originated from outside colleges and universities. It is time, now, for higher education to assume leadership by assisting public officials, accrediting organizations, and colleges and universities in the development of effective student outcomes assessment. The National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, therefore, is issuing a statement of principles to guide those who may be planning or revising programs in the future. The Association is not endorsing the establishment of student outcomes assessment in each state or university system, but where programs have been or will be introduced, it is very important that they be soundly based. Skillfully and intelligently executed assessment can, under the right circumstances, benefit both states and universities.

When it is necessary or desirable for a state or institution to develop a program, the Association recommends that it establish, first, fundamental principles or guidelines such as the ones stated here. It should then answer certain basic questions— What is the purpose of assessment? What is to be assessed to achieve the purpose? What are the problems, the benefits? Only then, should an institution look for the means best suited to the particular purpose, circumstances, and campus.

A growing consensus has been developing in recent years about the principles, purposes, and problems of student outcomes assessment. This underlying agreement promises the development of well-informed and effective means of assessment in the future. This consensus is reflected in the following principles:

1. Institutional, program, and student outcomes assessment should focus, primarily, on the effectiveness of academic programs and on the improvement of student learning and performance.

This statement of principles gives emphasis to developmental assessment—to the improvement of teaching and learning. Such an emphasis may require different and perhaps more complex means or techniques for assessment than those required where institutional accountability is the main purpose. By concentrating mainly on the improvement of teaching and learning, colleges and universities can also demonstrate achievement and assure quality to students, parents, citizens, and the state. Accountability and development can be complementary goals rather than contradictory ones.

2. States and institutions should rely primarily on incentives rather than regulations or penalties to effect student outcomes assessment and foster improvement.

The most successful initiatives to date have been those which create an environment that encourages and enables colleges and universities to improve academic programs and educate students more effectively. Incentives create a positive climate for change and help allay faculty apprehensions. An incentive based assessment program can require, recognize, and reward excellence and, at the same time, fulfill the public's expectations for improvement and accountability. Even though accrediting organizations are not funding agencies, they too can develop incentives and create a positive environment for outcomes assessment.

3. Institutional programs for evaluation and assessment should be developed in collaboration with the faculty.

The consent of those expected to devise and execute assessment is very important. Faculty should have a sense that assessment is useful to them and serves an important educational purpose. They have been evaluating students for years and have developed, in many instances, effective means for doing so. These could helpfully shape the more focussed and systematic approaches to assessment typically required for state-wide assessment programs or by accrediting agencies.

4. Assessment requirements should permit colleges and universities to develop institutional programs and define indicators of quality appropriate to their missions and goals and consistent with state-wide objectives and standards.

Diversity of purpose and programs is one of the most remarkable features of American higher education. What

may most effectively evaluate programs and student achievement at one institution may not work so well at another. Missions may differ; programs will, as well; and student ability will differ from one campus to another. With the cooperation and endorsement of the state or university system, each campus should be able to design and appropriate an effective assessment program.

Assessment has become an important area of concern and study for higher education, and there are several effective institutional programs in existence. With the accumulated experiences from several states and a number of institutions to guide them, colleges and universities can, where it is expected or required, assume this responsibility.

The Virginia Plan incorporates this principle. It is a decentralized plan, which requires each institution to establish an assessment program and make progress reports. It does not however, set state-wide standards or specify mechanisms or indicators which all must use.

5. Colleges and universities should be encouraged to use multiple methods of assessment for improving teaching and learning and demonstrating achievement.

It has become increasingly clear that no single mechanism—no standardized test, for example—can effectively evaluate the subtleties and complexities of a college education or even of an education in a single major. Assessment is beginning to move beyond basic skills testing or standardized tests toward qualitative means of assessment. There is a growing attempt to measure such capabilities as critical thinking, to understand better the experiences of students and faculty, to understand how student goals effect outcomes. As assessment becomes more complex and sophisticated, multiple indicators of achievement of quality becomes necessary.

It has also become clear that assessment tools should be based on reliable research and proven practice. Otherwise, they might not achieve the goals universities and states have set. Interested parties, moreover, are recognizing that it takes time to design and institute effective assessment programs. A report by the College Outcomes Evaluation Program in New Jersey acknowledges that it may take 10 years to fully implement the state's plan. States and accrediting organizations should avoid unrealistic requirements that lead to hasty and simplistic responses from institutions.

6. Requirements for assessment should be fiscally conservative and avoid imposing costly evaluation programs on institutions or state agencies.

Funding for higher education is growing very slowly, and the demands on resources are very great. Colleges and universities are, therefore, concerned that mandated or required assessment programs may have to be funded from current resources for instruction and research, thus reducing the funds available for directly supporting and improving existing academic programs. Since few states are able to provide significant new resources to fund assessment programs, the potential costs should be carefully considered in advance.

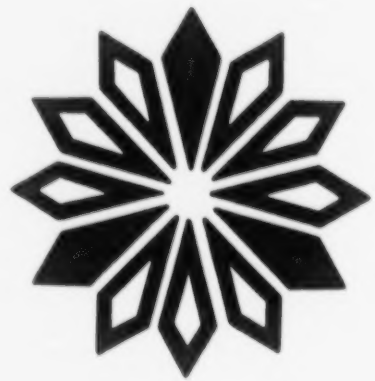
Whenever possible, methods of assessment should be based on existing information, such as admissions, retention, and completion date, alumni follow-up studies, job or graduate school placement, certification exams, accreditation outcomes, as well as existing testing and review practices. Such attention to existing data will be both educationally and economically efficient.

7. Within an institution, assessment programs should be linked to strategic planning or program review, or to some comprehensive strategy intended to encourage change and improvement.

Assessment is simply one way of achieving the two goals of documenting effectiveness and improving teaching and learning. Promoted and instituted as a separate program—as an end to itself—or as a means primarily to evaluate faculty, assessment may create an atmosphere of suspicion and fail to achieve either goal. Within states, assessment could usefully be linked to general improvement programs, such as selective excellence or other grants or to state-wide master plans for improving education and serving the state and nation. On campuses, it could be linked not only to planning and program review, but to broad curricular reform, as well.

Approved by the NASULGC Executive Committee
November, 1988

Statement of Principles on Student Outcomes Assessment



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